

Watching "Sharia Business" At Close Quarter

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Julie Billaud Mo 6 Feb 2012

By [JULIE BILLAUD](#)



A global mega-city with a colonial past like London is the place to study the interaction of Islamic law and the modern world.

This is what I am going to do during my three months of research at the Muslim College. Some first impressions:

The [Muslim College](#) in London was created by Azhar-trained Prof. [Zaki Badawi](#) in 1984, with the view of producing new generations of British imams. The College provides post-graduate courses in Quran and Hadiths, Arabic, history, theology and shariah law. Concerned with the objective of promoting a vision of Islam that fits within the UK context, the

curriculum emphasises on the areas of interpenetration between Islamic and Western civilisations by holding inter-faith activities and encouraging students to read beyond Islamic sources. The College is also home to a small shariah council that provides Islamic divorces, mediation and guidance services to the Muslim community. During my fellowship with 'Rechtskulturen', I will spend three months here, attending daily classes, discussing with students and scholars, trying to grasp the Islamic legal culture that has made its way in the British multicultural megalopolis, as part of its postcolonial heritage.

On my first day, I am surprised to realise that the classroom counts an equal number of male and female students. I sit next to Evelyn, a half French half Saudi, British born 23-year-old woman, who specialises in Islamic law and calls herself a 'Muslim Wahhabi'. She wears a Saudi habaya with a matching black hijab and speaks fluent Arabic, French and English. We greet each other and she tells me in French, pointing at her outfit: 'I wear this only to attend the courses here, not to be annoyed by the others. But the rest of the time, I dress normally, like a modern girl!'. Slightly disoriented by this first encounter, I open my notebook, ready to record my first shariah class. Evelyn will tell me later on that once her MA completed, she would like to open a legal firm for businesswomen in Dubai. 'Why don't you use this knowledge here? You could join one of these Solicitors Firms that offer matrimonial services for British Muslim women', I suggest. 'I am too sensitive to deal with divorces and family disputes. I would rather work on commercial law', she replies.

In 2011, a leading law firm, Russel Jones and Walker with its headquarters in the historic Chancery Lane, has launched the first Islamic Legal Services Division available in the UK. Unlike sharia councils, that function on a voluntary community-organised basis, this professional service is run by a female Muslim lawyer trained in both Islamic and civil law. On its website, the firm advertises: 'We obtain a payment of the wife's 'Mahr' (mandatory Islamic marital financial settlement) and wedding jewellery as part of the divorce settlement or by issuing a civil claim. If your marriage is not recognised under UK law but you have made contributions to the family assets we are able to recover your share under Trust Law.' As I read the firm's glossy corporate brochure, I wonder what remains of Islam when it becomes commodified. Or are Muslim women simply finding an alternative entry door to the 'sharia business' from which they have been quite absent up to recently?

London, as a global marketplace, is expending its tentacles beyond the niche of Islamic finance, where it pioneered a decade ago, and is now reaching the sphere of family law. Indeed, London has become a key centre for Islamic finance outside of the Middle East and with the current financial crisis, halal banking represents an attractive alternative for investors. Some students at the College are also considering this career option.

The emergence of 'sharia-compliant' products in global megacities deeply disrupts some of the classic categories used by anthropologists to represent experiences of contemporary Muslims. The encounter of Europe with Islam, especially in the legal field, has created new 'assemblages', forcing us to revisit notions of religiosity, ethics and morals and their connections with the neoliberal market economy. In this respect, Talal Asad's definition of Islam as a 'discursive tradition' enshrined in sacred texts falls short at accounting for such developments. The power of Islamic ideals of piety and morality derived from the Quran and the Sunna does not make Muslim hermetic to other influences. While sensitive to the critiques of Asad and his followers regarding the necessity to take Islamic sources of knowledge seriously, my initial observations encourage me to find an approach that does not reduce 'Muslims' to their religion and Islam to the sacred texts, and to remain careful to other parameters, such as neoliberalism and the competition it fosters on the global marketplace of identities.

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